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Coast Guard Icebreakers Work to Make the Hudson Passable

By IAN FISHER,

Tom Amidon, as lean and weathered as one would expect from a Coast Guard officer, was stating the obvious as he looked from his ship to the stalled oil barge to the north. Great chunks of floating ice -- the size of skulls, of card tables, of bandstands -- trapped Barge No. 130 and its tug in a slender track of unfrozen water.

"That is a huge barge," said Chief Amidon, the chief boatswain. "He's going to have a hell of a time getting down the river."

As a crew member on the Sturgeon Bay, a 140-foot ice-breaking vessel in the Hudson River, it was Chief Amidon's job to help free the barge, which had gone only a few hundred yards in an hour. In this harshest of winters, the Sturgeon Bay and the Coast Guard's four other icebreakers have assisted more than 200 vessels, stuck in a river frozen two feet thick from shore to shore. Last year they helped 37 boats; the year before, 28.

Without them, eastern New York might be even colder. While most other areas of the state are fed by pipelines, the region from Westchester to Albany and farther north gets nearly all its heating oil, gasoline, diesel fuel and kerosene from the hulking barges that float up and down the Hudson River. Grueling Voyage

When the river is clear, the 126-mile trip from the George Washington Bridge to Albany, the main port, takes 20 to 24 hours. Even with the slightly warmer weather of the last few days, it has become a grueling voyage that lasts 40 or more hours, in some cases tripling the cost of shipping and raising heating oil prices for the region a penny a gallon higher than the state average.

"I've been doing this for 28 years and this is probably the worst I have ever seen," said Pat Conlin, operations manager for Bouchard Transportation Company, of Hicksville, L.I., one of the state's largest barge operators. "It's been so cold, if you get a mile or two behind the icebreaker, she freezes up again."

While the 17-member crew of the Sturgeon Bay does not like to see others suffer, the truth is, they are thrilled with this winter. On seven-day tours of a long stretch of the Hudson, they pry out boats from the ice, cut channels for barges to pass, and when it is quiet, even play a little football in the middle of the river. They have worked in blizzards, one night freeing up a convoy of seven ships locked in place near Hudson. In January the Sturgeon Bay's sister ship, the Penobscot Bay, assisted a barge of jet fuel, in a rush to fill tanks at the Albany airport which had fallen to a half day's supply.

"The worse it is, the more we do our jobs," said Lieut. Steven J. Andersen, the ship's commander. "If the river is open, it's better for the tugs and that's fine. But when it's bad, it's pretty fun." Ice Breaking's Lingo

The ship does not technically cut through the ice. Its hull is rounded and the vessel slides on top of ice fields like an overweight walrus bellying up to shore. The ship's 662 tons crush the ice, to a maximum of 30 inches. Ice breaking has its own lingo. Brash is the word for chopped-up ice that looks like a Slurpee. Hummocked describes pieces of ice piled up and refrozen. Fast ice is in fact immobile.

Whatever the name, it has been a constant chore to keep the shipping lanes clear with temperatures that have dropped as low as 32 degrees below zero on the river.

"When it's in the mid-20's the ice doesn't freeze as fast, so it gives us an advantage," Lieutenant Andersen said. "But when it's in the teens or less, anything we do is very temporary."

This morning, the Sturgeon Bay left a fuel pier in Kingston, N.Y., at 7 A.M., as a frigid mist rose from the channel of ice broken the night before. The river was stark and beautiful: A bridal veil of ice draped a row of willows. Deer tracks led from the shore to the water's edge but did not return. Two coyotes, one with a wounded paw, loped on the frozen river watching the icebreaker pass.

The day started slowly and the icebreaker's only duty as it steamed north was to clear the track for a barge, towed by two tugs, hauling 75,000 barrels of gasoline to Albany. But the river began to get crowded around 11 A.M. with three empty barges traveling south, two of them stuck in the narrow track of free water just north of Coxsackie.

The middle one was Barge No. 130, an enormous vessel 403 feet long and 78 feet wide that would cause trouble all day, as well as be a reason for jubilation.

Lieutenant Andersen began untangling traffic by ordering a swath of ice cut on the eastern side of the southbound barges, to allow the northbound barge a lane to pass. As the Sturgeon Bay began cracking through virgin ice, the bow raised slightly and the ice groaned as it cracked and peeled away from the hull.

Within an hour, the icebreaker had cleared enough ice for the barges to squeeze around one another, and apparently, to free the two that were trapped. But Barge No. 130 became stuck again and would barely move even after the Sturgeon Bay made pass after pass, chopping away ice for yet another hour.

This presented an opportunity: For weeks, the crew had wanted to experiment with pushing a barge, as a last-ditch emergency measure, but no tug operators were willing to go along. Today the Alice Moran, the green and red tug hauling Barge No. 130, had little choice.

The Sturgeon Bay first maneuvered its bow to the rear of the barge, with three rubber fenders affixed to the front to prevent their metal hulls from scraping. Then its engine revved and the barge began to creak forward.

"Hey, we're under way," Chief Amidon said over the radio to Lieutenant Andersen. "It must have worked, sir."

The newly proven method for fighting the river called for a celebration, as the ship and barge cut a razor-clean swath through the ice. The men pulled out their cameras. Chief Electrician Glenn Lewis, the head of the engineering room, came aloft and rang a bell covered with ice. Chief Lewis then stood guard waiting for a barge man on No. 130 to leave so Patrick Skinner, a chatty seaman from Georgia, could secretly stencil the ship's name on the barge's hull.